

## FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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# Brunei

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The absolute monarchy of Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, as well as emergency laws that have been in effect for nearly half a century, continue to restrict journalists and limit the diversity of media content in Brunei. Since 2001, harsh press legislation has required that newspapers apply for annual publishing permits and noncitizens obtain government approval to work as journalists. The government has the authority to arbitrarily shut down media outlets and to bar distribution of foreign publications. Journalists can be jailed for up to three years for reporting “false and malicious” news. The May 2005 Sedition Act further restricted press freedom by expanding the list of punishable offenses to include criticism of the sultan, the royal family, or the national philosophy, known as the Malay Islamic Monarchy concept, which promotes Islam as the state religion and monarchical rule as the sole acceptable governing system. Under the amended law, persons convicted of such crimes, or any publishers, editors, or proprietors of a newspaper publishing items with seditious intent, face fines of up to BN\$5,000 (approximately US\$4,000).

No incidents of attacks on or harassment of journalists have been reported in recent years. The government has on occasion warned the media not to take chances while reporting on the sultanate. Media are generally not able to convey a diversity of viewpoints and opinions, and criticism of the government is rare.

The private press, including the country’s main English-language daily newspaper, the *Borneo Bulletin*, is mostly owned or controlled by the sultan’s family and practices self-censorship on political and religious matters to avoid angering the government. In July 2006, after receiving permission from the sultan, an independent media company run by a group of prominent businessmen launched a second English-language daily, the *Brunei Times*. The paper’s global focus is intended to help foster international investment in light of the country’s dwindling oil and gas reserves, thus promoting current government priorities. It also offers a wider range of international, finance, and opinion pieces, as well as online polls on government policies. A smaller Malay-language newspaper and several Chinese-language newspapers are also published within Brunei. Foreign newspapers are available, but require prior government approval before distribution. There have been occasional blocks of some foreign media in the past. The only local broadcast outlets, including the country’s one television station, are operated by the government-controlled Radio Television Brunei, but residents can also receive Malaysian broadcasts, and international news is available via satellite channels.

In 2011, roughly 56 percent of the population accessed the internet, which is reportedly monitored by the government. The primary internet service provider is state owned. An Internet Code of Practice, included in the 2001 press law, makes individuals as well as content and service providers liable for publishing anything that is “against the public interest or national harmony or which offends against good taste or decency.” It also requires all sites that carry content or discuss issues of a religious or political nature to register with the Broadcasting Authority and makes failure to register punishable by

## 2012 SCORES

### PRESS STATUS

# Not Free

### PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

# 75

### LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

# 28

### POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

# 25

### ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

# 22

imprisonment for up to three years and/or a fine of up to US\$200,000. In 2006, the government called on internet cafés to install firewalls to prevent users from viewing immoral content and, according to the U.S. State Department, the government continues to monitor private e-mails and internet chat room exchanges of citizens suspected of being subversive, which is believed to reduce the number of chat room visitors.

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